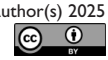
Special Section: Live Methods Revisited

The Sociological Review

Introduction to Live Methods Revisited: The roots and conjuncture of *Live Methods*

The Sociological Review
2025, Vol. 73(5) 941–952



DOI: 10.1177/00380261251335432
journals.sagepub.com/home/sor
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Abstract

In this introduction to Live Methods Revisited, we reflect upon the conjuncture in which *Live Methods* was originally published as a way of contextualising and appraising its legacy. In doing so we focus on an aspect of *Live Methods* which has had less attention – the politics of methods. *Live Methods* offered a reassertion of the promise and potential for sociological practice through reimagining methods, in the face of a proclaimed crisis of empirical sociology. Resultantly, it made an important intervention into how sociological research methods are practised, understood and written about. Following the 10-year anniversary of its publication, the reflections on the legacy of *Live Methods* have taken on greater meaning, in a different kind of crisis, that of Higher Education. The dire impacts of marketisation have borne directly upon the institution in which *Live Methods* was created, marking this special section in *The Sociological Review* as offering a critical reflection and an act of preservation of the distinct contribution of Goldsmiths Sociology. We reflect upon the role of *Live Methods* in the current political conjuncture and how it may, in renewed ways, offer different kinds of interventions to help navigate and creatively resist this contemporary crisis.

Keywords

higher education, live methods, methods, politics of research, sociology

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The roots and conjuncture of *Live Methods*

This collection started out as a 10-year anniversary celebration of *Live Methods* – a publication that made an important intervention into how sociological research methods are practised, understood and written about. However, over the two years we have been working on this special section, it has become something different. Alongside a celebration, it has become an act of preservation and an intervention in a moment of great upheaval. While the original *Live Methods* was written partly in response to the 'crisis in empirical sociology' (Savage & Burrows, 2007), as we write this in the summer of 2024 we are in another crisis moment, characterised by the brutal destruction of the social sciences across institutions in the UK – including Goldsmiths, the intellectual home of the original collection.

Live Methods was a clarion call for sociologists, powerfully introduced by an 11-point manifesto (Back & Puwar, 2012b) setting out 'a more artful and crafty approach to sociological research [that] embraces new technological opportunities while expanding the attentiveness of researchers' (p. 6). This approach was far removed from the dry methods textbook, with readers encouraged to explore approaches including sociology as curation, as sensory, as scavenging, as well as being asked to consider how the audit culture engulfing universities was impacting on social research. These aspects of methodological innovation and enquiry into the structures that govern research are closely linked. *Live Methods* presents a set of tools for doing research in real time which can respond to and capture what Hall calls the make-up of particular political conjunctures (Hall in Hall & Massey, 2010, p. 57). Hall argues that understanding the conjunctural moment requires an attentiveness to how social relations and historical processes come together in particular contexts alongside an engagement with politics as it actually exists in everyday life. Live methods as an approach to research can respond to this in offering a vital critical sociological intervention to public debates and politics in tumultuous and reactionary times.

In engaging with the legacy of *Live Methods*, many of the contributions in this collection have reflected upon the methodological opportunities, creativity and imagination that it has offered sociological research practice. At the core of the *Live Methods* legacy is how it has inspired creative reorientation towards opportunities for more inventive methods and renewal of traditional methods as a means of *reinventing the craft of sociology*. This involved reclaiming a sociological history of more artful methods, as Nirmal Puwar argues in our interview in this issue, 'methods was always a place where sociology happens'. In particular, Back's (2015) notion of 'live sociology' offered an original and powerful methodological approach, via 'an ethnographic sensibility and an ongoing engagement with lives unfolding in real time and through time' (p. 834). This intervention has been influential across multiple fields in sociology, including digital sociology, ethnography, multiculturalism and material methods seen in the contributions in this special issue (see contributions from Woodward, Sinha and Herbert). Reading the papers in this collection inspires and provides hope for the power of sociology in the same way that the original *Live Methods* collection did.

What has often been given less attention – and which we draw out here – is the contribution of *Live Methods* to the *politics of methods.* This is a key contribution of this special issue. And – as we will go on to argue – this feels particularly urgent in our

current context. *Live Methods* was, in part, a response to what was described as a 'crisis of empirical sociology' (Adkins & Lury, 2009; Savage & Burrows, 2007). In their landmark paper, Savage and Burrows (2007) outlined this crisis as being related to how methods have become 'an intrinsic feature of contemporary capitalist organization' (p. 895). They called for a new 'politics of method', that 'involves sociologists renewing their interests in methodological innovation, and reporting critically on new digitalisations' (Savage & Burrows, 2007, p. 896).

The broader political context to Savage and Burrow's paper is key here. It emerged at a time where empirical sociological research was becoming almost exclusively contingent upon sociologists gaining huge research grants, which demand methodological innovation, 'impact' and dictated not only the tempo of sociological work but the character, value and form of knowledge produced. All of which can undermine the radical and political value of sociological interventions. A year after the publication of *Savage and Burrow's paper*, the Research Excellence Framework was born out of the Research Assessment Exercise in Britain. Not only were methods and research becoming an 'intrinsic feature of contemporary capitalist organization', so too were universities themselves. Data from 147 universities in the 2021/22 financial year showed a record income for UK universities of £44.6bn (University and College Union [UCU], 2023), yet these profits are spread unevenly and working conditions and pay have declined while job insecurity has increased. *Live Methods* responded to that 'crisis', not by mirroring or seizing a stake in these emerging commercial forms of data and research, but rather, the antithesis, by adapting through creativity whilst retaining political and ethical commitments within sociology. In the context of institutional quests for profit and income generation such an approach might seem like idealistic folly, but it is quietly and steadfastly political in its resistance to commerciality in favour of creativity. As Wadsworth et al. (2025) outline in their contribution, it is 'creative resistance'.

The *Live Methods* manifesto ends with the following sentiment: 'it is a timely moment for conducting a contemporary Homo Academicus (Bourdieu, 1988), and to debate the forms of work we are doing, the kinds of academics we are producing, and the institutional and life worlds we occupy as well as make' (Back & Puwar, 2012b p. 15). This for us is a powerful – if yet not fully answered – call. In *Homo Academicus*, Bourdieu (1984/1988) offers his analysis of academia and contemporary intellectual culture. He highlights how the academy is a realm of power in which careers forged can be both gilded and ravaged. In the neoliberal context of research practice and university life, this is all the more vital as institutional life, departments and careers are made and destroyed by the neoliberalisation of universities (see Wadsworth et al., 2025 in this collection; Davies, 2024). This brings us back to the changing institutional context of *Live Methods* and those who work in this tradition. It also brings us back to the specificities of Goldsmiths Sociology, the institutional home of authors Les Back and Nirmal Puwar at the time of the book's publication in 2012.

As Les and Nirmal reflect in their interview for this issue, *Live Methods* was a product of Goldsmiths Sociology, its intellectual culture, its research and atmosphere. Many of the original contributors had ties to the institution and the chapters within it both drew on and nurtured the department's strong legacy as a hub of sociological innovation in research methods. This work is exemplified in *Live Methods* (2012) and in the later

volume *How to do Social Research with. . .* (Coleman et al., 2023). While Goldsmiths Sociology is renowned for this work within the wider sociological community, recent events demonstrate that it is not valued within its own institution (see Back, 2024). In early 2024 Goldsmiths' senior management team announced plans to make over half of the staff in the Sociology Department redundant as part of their wider 'Transformation Programme', targeting 11 out of 19 departments at Goldsmiths. Over time, the ratio of staff to be made redundant in the department increased to 71%, before most targeted staff took 'enhanced redundancy' and left the institution. As Back (2024) has argued, the impact of this is devastating: 'The decline and redundancies that will follow from the "Transformation Programme" will eviscerate an incredible body of sociological scholarship and threaten to reduce it to a corpse fit only for autopsy ' (n.p.).

This was a local crisis – although deeply entangled within wider struggles in HE – that many of those of us involved in this special collection have felt acutely and are deeply affected by. Although particularly severe at Goldsmiths, this is not just a crisis affecting one institution. The social sciences have also been cut at the universities of Kent, Huddersfield, Birkbeck, Brighton, with more on the way, as part of a wider crisis of the devaluing of arts, social science and humanities subjects and the failing financial model of the marketised university (Brackley et al., 2024; Davies, 2024). While the seriousness of the crisis within UK universities is plain, with around half currently operating at a financial loss and some experiencing more serious difficulty (Augar, 2024), Skills Minister Baroness Jacqui Smith declared that she would allow a university to go bust 'if it were necessary'. Many who work at UK Higher Education institutions are nervously awaiting the next academic year's student enrolment numbers. And in those universities who are, for now, financially comfortable, the narrative of crisis is an increasingly powerful management tool.

We believe that it is vital to have these debates within Sociology and within the pages of this journal to take seriously this crisis, what it means for Sociology, sociological practice and methods, and for our colleagues across the sector. As *The Sociological Review* manifesto[1] states, we are committed *to work to envision radical alternatives* but *also to foster the ability to hope, to care and support, to repair and to heal* and returning to *Live Methods* is a means to do that. But given the depths of violence against Goldsmiths Sociology, this special section is both a vital preservation as well as celebration of *Live Methods*, giving testimony to its legacy, value and necessity in the present conjuncture.

The politics of *Live Methods* and the role and value of sociology

This contemporary evolving crisis in UK Higher Education then requires a deep engagement with the politics of *Live Methods. Live Methods* offers an 11-point methodological manifesto which as the authors reveal in their interview is a nod to Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. Some points are explicitly political, like Point 11 ('Engage political and ethical issues without arrogance or the drum roll of political piety'), while others more subtly interwoven. 'Politics' and 'politics of knowledge' are keywords in both Back and Puwar's introduction and Les Back's contribution. It is deeply woven through the discussion but is the less considered aspect of its legacy. This special section allows an opportunity to revisit this and consider the relationship between

the politics and approaches that *Live Methods* inspires. The politics of methods runs through this collection, sometimes explicitly, with the discussion of live methods as 'creative resistance' (Wadsworth et al., 2025), to reflections on the ethical vocation and political commitments of research (Doucet et al., 2025; Herbert, 2025; Sinha, 2025), to ruminations of the value of live methods to give insight into the present conjuncture (Coleman et al., 2025).

In the editor's introduction to the original *Live Methods* collection, Shilling (2012) says the monograph was addressing 'the value to sociology of research methods' (p. 2). 'The choice of topic reflects a growing concern about the purpose, relevance, and distinctiveness of the discipline at a time when sociologists in the UK and elsewhere face questions regarding their contribution to the study of social life and threats to intellectual autonomy' (p. 2). The opportunity to reimagine the sociological craft which underpinned the *Live Methods* manifesto was based on the concern that there was a crisis facing empirical sociology, as diagnosed by Savage and Burrows (2007) landmark paper. Savage and Burrows saw the crisis in sociology not as one related to theory or research paradigms but instead as a crisis within empirical research in the age of *knowing capitalism*. They argue that sociologists were not equipped to deal with the challenges to their expertise brought by the growth of data collected and analysed by private and public institutions. In their 2009 rejoinder article, 'Some Further Reflections on the Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology', they reaffirm this view:

> Welcome to the world of 'knowing capitalism' (Thrift, 2005): a world inundated with complex processes of social and cultural digitization; a world in which commercial forces predominate; a world in which we, as sociologists, are losing whatever jurisdiction we once had over the study of the 'social' as the generation, mobilization and analysis of social data become ubiquitous. (Savage & Burrows, 2009, p. 763).

The remedy to this, according to the authors, is that sociology should prioritise description over practices of explanation and analysis, and attention to questions of causality. The polemical nature of the Savage and Burrows article did lay plenty of bait, as sociologists seized upon the claims made about both the nature of the crisis and the resolutions offered. Fitzgerald (2019) notes that the article had been cited more than 800 times by the summer of 2018, with two follow-up articles also penned by the authors (Burrows & Savage, 2014; Savage & Burrows, 2009). Some writers criticised the paper; Crompton (2008) called it a misspecification of the issues around quantitative research, while others offered alternative reading to the conjuncture of sociological research. In the interview with Back and Puwar in this special section, Les Back describes this paper 'as running up the white flag of methodological surrender'.

While Savage and Burrows were prescient in recognising the emergence of complex information-based capitalism and digital culture in shaping the politics of methods, it is the other aspect they identify which seems to have had the most ruinous of impacts, and that is the role of the universities in capitalist economy. The questioning of 'value' is not something unique to the sociological researcher, but to academia in general. This manifests in increased student fees and marketisation, including the massive growth in the international student 'market', the ramping up of performance management tactics,

the degradation of working conditions, and more pressure to 'perform' with less time and fewer resources. Within this urgent context, the concern for not having sovereignty over the interview method, or forms of data, really isn't the real threat and takes us down the wrong path. Since the year of the paper's publication in 2007, audit measures have formed a stranglehold on universities and researchers, and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) announced the birth of REF (Research Excellence Framework) for assessing research quality in UK universities to replace the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). Parker (2019) describes this as the largest, quietest privatisation in UK history. This broader capitalist context has serious bearing on the politics of methods. This has been recognised by many sociologists, who have reflected on the impact of neoliberalisation (see Burrows, 2012; Gill, 2010; Loveday, 2021; Morrish, 2020). Gane (2011) acknowledges the bearing of the broader structural and market changes affecting universities:

> . . . the discipline is facing a range of new institutional pressures, particularly in the United Kingdom, where the future of state funding for the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular, is looking increasingly precarious. In the face of these developments, not to mention the unprecedented de-centring and specialization of the discipline, sociology genuinely seems to be in, or at least threatened by, a condition of crisis. (Gane, 2011, p. 152)

Back too recognises the political nature of the crisis noting that the 'empirical crisis' was an inherently political one given the pressures of the audit culture and digital capitalism in impacting our craft, but, crucially, he reaches a different conclusion: 'It seems like social research in future will be ever more tied to the corporate interest and what Edward Said characterised as the "organic intellectuals" of the knowledge industries' (Back, 2012, p. 36). In this sense, the debates initiated by the 'Coming Empirical Crisis' and *Live Methods* signalled a fork in the road, each speak in various ways to the 'value' of sociology, suggesting different modes and trajectories for sociological practice – one pragmatic and cynical and the other more political and optimistic. Back and Puwar's *Live Methods* offered a more generous and generative response to this sense of crisis by outlining a manifesto for approaching sociology which acknowledged the limitations (the 'dead sociology' which ought to be 'buried') as well as the new opportunities that were possible if we embraced the creative and critical opportunities of technological advances. But within all of this, it provided a pathway of methodological opportunity which was underpinned by ethics, politics and critique as well as creativity and imagination. That spirit is alive and well within this collection.

Creative resistance through live methods

Back (2012) notes that how we do research, our practice, has 'moral consequences'. There are moral consequences which arise from 'the way sociologists tell society' as well as political consequences. The papers in this collection express these ethics of attentiveness to the social world and the way that we 'tell society' in different ways, which offer a kind of creative resistance. We see this expressed through, firstly, an attentiveness to the everyday, and secondly, in the reflections on the political and ethical commitments of research.

First, in terms of attentiveness to the everyday, Woodward's (this collection) argument that 'we need to retrain our attention to the unmarked which is often forgotten about' has become an important legacy of *Live Methods*. In her article on researching people's clutter, Woodward (2025) argues that 'attentiveness to the vibrancy of everyday things (Bennett, 2010) can expand the possibilities of a vital sociology'. For her this is not just about what we are attentive to (in this case discarded items that are nevertheless hung on to) but how we hone and practise attentiveness to our data. Woodward (this collection) draws out how unused things despite their 'dormancy' connect participants to times past, or can even be regarded as capable of helping connections form in possible futures. For example, we meet Daniel, carefully keeping a full bar – despite not drinking alcohol himself – just in case someone comes around. The paper demonstrates how even things that are seemingly without function can illuminate forms of social connection ('These small objects can allow people to have hope and to live their lives in a world that makes these difficult as well as reminding them of the challenges they face'). There is also a powerful argument here about time and slow sociology – it takes time to get to the bottom of why the unused cables matter. This resonates with Sinha's paper reflecting on long-term research relationships and longitudinal ethnography and how time provides deeper, meaningful and more ethical insight: 'longevity meant there was a scope to see what time can do for understanding present accounts, and re-understanding what you thought you knew from prior ones' (Sinha 2025). Woodward attributes this ability to take time in her research project to the fact that the project was unfunded and therefore unpressured. Once again this brings us back to the ties between the material conditions of research and how research is conducted.

Moving from slow sociology to a more fast-paced project, Coleman et al.'s paper also pays attention to the everyday, albeit through examining the time of the pandemic – a moment of profound dislocation and disturbance to people's routine and rhythms. Using a range of creative methods and working with accounts from the Mass Observation Archive, Coleman et al. (2025) researched the pandemic in real time as it unfolded, giving their project a 'liveness' that necessitated a series of pivots ('being flexible, responsive and willing to shift, and shift again, our approach'). Conducting research in an unstable moment involved making 'sociological craft more artful and crafty' (Back & Puwar, 2012b, p. 9) to adapt to these ever-changing circumstances.

Coleman et al. build on Back's (2012) commitment to studying 'lives unfolding in real time and through time' (p. 34) to bring in people's sense of time. Engaging with participants' accounts of their feelings and experiences, the researchers propose the linked terms 'present feelings' and 'feeling present': 'to help us move from participants' feelings in and about the pandemic to how these feelings, in Williams' (1977) terms, give the "sense of a generation or of a period" (p. 131); a collective, but not undifferentiated or static, experience of the pandemic.' This provides insights into the specificities of the pandemic period as a conjunctural moment. In the spirit of live methods, this is an example of how methods practised as craft rather than as technical procedure involve a close link between methods and the conceptual tools/analysis produced: 'we argue that a sociological interest in liveness cannot, and should not, remain in the domain of methods but necessarily seeps into and informs wider questions of how research is theorised and analysed' (Coleman et al., 2025).

Secondly, we see creative resistance in the political and ethical commitments of research practices expressed throughout the collection. This speaks to how Back and Puwar (2012b) urge us to see the larger picture temporally as well as geopolitically, in order to 'undertake the epistemic work of developing a sociological imagination that moves between personal anxieties to large, impersonal social conditions' (p. 8). Doucet et al.'s paper confronts geopolitical histories and past-present continuities through reflecting on the politico-ethical issues in relational collaborative research between an Indigenous community organisation and a university research team consisting of Indigenous and white settler researchers. The authors reflect upon their use and adaptation of the Listening Guide, a feminist narrative analysis approach (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Reading the Listening Guide through a 'ethico-political, methodological, and onto-epistemological' lens, they argue against there being a singular guide, recognising that 'all methods have histories and exist within geo-political, socio-cultural, philosophical, ethical, epistemological, and ontological contexts, they are neither static objects nor recipes that can be applied uniformly across all projects and contexts'. As Back notes:

> The problem is not just a matter of method, but suggests that our intellectual architecture is not adequate in attending to the scope and scale of global processes . . . the current pressures on empirical sociological imagination need not lead to epistemological defeat but perhaps greater humility about the truth we might touch but not grasp fully, while contesting the realities that others claim with such certainty. (Back, 2012, p. 20)

This is illustrated by Sinha's piece, which explores the ethics of ethnography, reflecting on the research process and research relationships over time, drawing from working with the same group of young migrants over 13 years. He interrogates the dominance of extractive qualitative methods which reduce people to flat, disconnected quotes of data, rendering them 'invisible and inaudible'. Instead, he recounts his repeated walks with research participant Mardoche, reflecting on practising live methods over time as an 'ethical vocation' driven by the imperative to be meaningfully attentive to vulnerable and precarious lives, and where:

> "Conversations with participants got deeper, and were underpinned by a kind of covenant on researchers sharing a political identification with the young migrants concerning the truths of what individual stories revealed for a more general understanding of precarity" (Sinha, 2025)

We can see across these examples how *Live Methods* was a 'disposition' and carried an 'imperative to care about and ameliorate suffering' (Gunaratnam, quoted in Back & Puwar, 2012b, p. 14). A similar disposition is cultivated in Doucet's et al.'s paper, and in their reflections upon how their practice was guided by an Indigenous community partner and experience of working with Indigenous community-based research. This saw them thinking with Indigenous conceptions and practices of care and so engaging in slow and respectful relationship building and deep listening practices. Similarly, Herbert's research with children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse and social care intervention expresses this kind of disposition and ethics in her methodological approach. Like Doucet et al. and Sinha, Herbert stresses that getting to know your

participants is essential to research relationships; this is what she calls 'researching with love'. Reflecting upon her practice in this 18-month multimodal ethnography, Herbert views 'love as the undergirding force in live methods'. Parsing her practice and experiences through her research, Herbert (2025) conceptualises love's role within live methods: 'love as commitment to one another's growth, a way of knowing and a creative force was essential in making the methods live'.

In all of these papers we can see live methods as resistance to the prescribed, static, uniformed, flattening, extractive approach to methods, and a resistance to seeing methods as a power grab (Becker, 2007). Instead, they all seek to cultivate something much more careful, ethical, generous and generative, as a form of creative resistance. It is Wadsworth et al.'s paper which conceptualises creative resistance the most powerfully and politically when they use the term to capture their interpretation and practice of live methods as an intervention. They offer reflections of their experience as PhD students at Goldsmiths Sociology, taught by Back and Puwar, and caught up in the industrial dispute at Goldsmiths over job cuts in 2021. That year the university announced compulsory redundancies, mid-pandemic, in English and Creative Writing, History and professional services staff. This was the year before hundreds of academic redundancies were announced at various universities across Britain (Dundee, Brighton, UEA, Birkbeck to name a few). In this paper, through a multimodal account of that industrial dispute where live methods was used as part of a picket line teach-out, they present a much wider and deeper legacy of *Live Methods* beyond sociology as a discipline, to situating it on campus, from the 'PhD seminar room to the strike picket lines'. They demonstrate how *Live Methods* became, quite literally, a tool of creative resistance when it was used and read on the picket line to voice demands:

> The influences of Live Methods become apparent in these moments of community – in seminar rooms, supervisory interactions, and corridor chats. These 'spaces of resistance [begin] to break down barriers and build relationships between all staff, the students, the local community, and the natural world' (McKnight, 2024, p. 63). (Wadsworth et al., 2005)

The future of live methods

Live Methods emerged from a time when the role of sociology was under question and the market's grip on the university was tightening. The focus was on ethics, politics, craft and imagination rather than on technical innovation, interdisciplinarity and a narrowly defined version of impact. As this new collection demonstrates, *Live Methods* continues to inspire and gives us useful tools for carrying out responsive research in this current conjuncture of crisis in the Higher Education sector and beyond.

We need research on everyday lives, communities, culture, politics – as it happens – in these politically hostile and tumultuous times in order not only to capture the present but as 'a means of attuning to the possibilities of social worlds *as they might be*' (Coleman et al., 2025). This must support and feed into political education via public sociology in ways that transcend impact, as narrowly defined in mechanisms like the REF. This approach is perhaps less obviously fundable but it is fundamental and requires a responsive and collective DIY approach (Paton, 2015) that is generous and informed by care.

Live methods can be a form of resistance to the neoliberal university and income-focused research culture. This also comes with a cost – a vulnerability – for not playing that game. To return to the ending of the *Live Methods* manifesto, the call to conduct a contemporary *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu, 1984/1988): 'to debate the forms of work we are doing, the kinds of academics we are producing, and the institutional and life worlds we occupy as well as make' (Back and Puwar, 2012b, p. 15), is still pressing. It is vital that we remind ourselves of these values and refresh them within our own practice. This is also at the heart of the manifesto of *The Sociological Review*, which offers 'an invitation to do sociology as part of a community, to work to envision radical alternatives, and to journey toward the future we wish to see'. As Les Back reflects in our interview in this collection, while we don't work in the conditions of our choosing, we can choose how to live our craft, and within that 'generosity is a survival strategy'. We add this as our own provocation in the spirit of *Live Methods* which we invite you to take with you as you read this collection, and beyond.

We hope you enjoy and are inspired by this new set of responses to *Live Methods*.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. https://thesociologicalreview.org/the-sociological-review-foundation/our-manifesto/

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